



DECISION MEMO

Echo Lake Basin Trail Construction Projects

**USDA Forest Service
Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest
Pintler Ranger District
Granite County, Montana**

T6N, R14W, Sections 24, 25, 26 and T6N, R13W, Sections 19 and 32

Background

Over the past several years, the Nordic ski trail system at Echo Lake has increased in popularity and a warming hut (Midway) was established in 2017. During the 2020 ski season, the warming hut parking lot was at capacity nearly every weekend. The proposed routes would enhance non-motorized recreation experiences in the Echo Lake Basin by providing more loop opportunities and an increase in the number of groomed routes, which have become very popular with Nordic skiers in recent years. The new routes would also link the trail system to other parking areas to ease congestion, consolidate use, and increase access.

Decision

I have decided to construct three new groomed routes within the Echo Lake Basin Nordic trail system to enhance winter non-motorized recreation by providing additional loop opportunities for cross-country skiers and linking the trail system to other parking areas for increased access. This decision will result in:

- Construct a trail approximately 1.5 miles in length connecting the Midway Warming Hut to the Red Lion snow parking lot. The trail would parallel National Forest System Road 1598 on the east side and be within the Black Powder Timber Sale area. The last 0.25 miles would follow an existing road corridor and connect to the Red Lion snow parking lot. The trail corridor would be approximately 10 feet wide and stumps would be removed to allow safe operation for snowmobile groomers.
- A 0.16 mile connector trail between the Runyon Gulch Road (Forest Service Road No. 1578) and the Jack Pine ski trail, which requires limbing and brushing as well as removal of some stumps and approximately 20 to 30 small diameter lodgepole pine trees (less than 10 in. dbh.). The route will be groomed during the winter months for Nordic skiing.
- An additional 3.85 miles of grooming on the existing Runyon Gulch Road (Forest Service Road No. 1578) that runs from Hwy 1 north to the private land boundary adjacent to Discovery Ski Area, which will be groomed during the winter months for Nordic skiing. This will not require any treadwork or vegetation removal.



Design Features Required by this Decision

The following design features are hereby made part of my decision and are described by resource area below:

Aquatics: If Western toads are found in the project area during implementation, they will be moved off site.

Heritage: If cultural resource sites or artifacts are discovered during project implementation the Forest Archeologist should be notified immediately.

Vegetation: Avoid mature 5-needle pine to the extent possible.

This action is categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement (EIS) or an environmental assessment (EA). The applicable category of actions is identified in agency procedures as *Construction and reconstruction of trails*. 36 CFR 220.6(e)(1). This category of action is applicable because the proposal involves construction of winter use trails to provide access for ski trail grooming equipment.

Based on my review of the project record, I find that there are no extraordinary circumstances that would warrant further analysis and documentation in an EA or EIS. I took into account resource conditions identified in agency procedures that should be considered in determining whether extraordinary circumstances might exist:

- ♦ **Federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat, or Forest Service sensitive species** – Potential effects of this decision on proposed, threatened, and endangered species as well as sensitive species have been analyzed and documented in wildlife and aquatics specialist reports. For wildlife, these analyses determined a “no effect” to grizzly bear (*Ursus arctos*) and a “may affect, not likely to adversely affect” Canada lynx (*Lynx canadensis*). For sensitive species, a determination of “may impact individuals or habitat, but will not likely contribute to a trend towards federal listing or loss of viability to the population or species” was made for Bald eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*), wolverine (*Gulo gulo luscus*), and Gray wolf (*Canis lupus*). A finding of “no impact” was determined for all other sensitive species. For aquatics proposed, threatened, and endangered species, these analyses determined a “no effect” for Bull trout (*Salvelinus confluentus*). For aquatic sensitive species, a determination of “may impact individuals or habitat, but will not likely contribute to a trend towards federal listing or loss of viability to the population or species” was made for Western toad (*Bufo boreas boreas*) and “no impact” was determined for all other sensitive species. This documentation can be found in the project record.
- ♦ **Flood plains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds** – No negative impacts to floodplains or wetlands are anticipated based on specialist review.



- ♦ **Congressionally designated areas such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or national recreation areas** – No congressionally-designated areas occur within the project area, therefore there would be no effect to congressionally designated areas.
- ♦ **Inventoried roadless areas or potential wilderness areas** – No inventoried roadless areas (IRA) or potential wilderness areas occur within the project area.
- ♦ **Research natural areas** – No RNAs are located within the project area, therefore there would be no effect to RNAs.
- ♦ **American Indians and Alaska Native religious or cultural sites** – No sites located within the project area.
- ♦ **Archaeological sites, or historic properties or areas** – No sites located within the project area.

Public Involvement

This action was originally listed as a proposal on the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA) and updated periodically during the analysis. Scoping was initiated on August 13, 2020 as part of a combined scoping effort featuring vegetation, fuels management, and lands special uses projects. The scoping packet included a project description and map of the Echo Lake Basin trails project area and was sent to 88 recipients, including interested members of the public, state agencies such as MT Department of Natural Resources Conservation and MT Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks, as well as local government, area tribes, and special interest groups including Western Watersheds Project, Alliance for Wild Rockies, Trout Unlimited, and Native Ecosystems Council. The same scoping packet was also made available digitally on the BDNF's current and recent project website.

The scoping letter requested input be submitted to the Forest Service by September 11, 2020, and included a contact phone number, fax number, and email address as a means of providing comments, concerns, or ideas. By November 30, 2020, other than a standard form letter from the Montana State Historic Preservation Office, no external comments had been received.

Internal scoping responses resulted in a small change to the proposed location of the 0.25-mile connector route leading from the Runyon Gulch Road (FS Road No. 1578) and the Jack Pine ski trail in order to avoid Canada lynx habitat. This change resulted in a shortened connector route from 0.25 miles to 0.16 miles and an additional 0.33 miles of the Runyon Gulch road being groomed to accommodate the more northerly location of the 0.16-mile connector.

Findings Required by Other Laws and Regulations

This decision is consistent with the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest Land Management Plan (2009). The project was designed in conformance with Forest Plan



direction including all applicable standards, objectives, and guidelines. The proposed action is consistent with all other Federal, State, and local laws and requirements.

Administrative Review Opportunities

Decisions made under Categorical Exclusions are not subject to objection pursuant to 36 CFR 218.

Implementation Date

This decision is not subject to objection pursuant to 36 CFR 218 and may begin immediately. Work is expected to commence in early December 2020.

Contact

For additional information concerning this decision, contact: William Shoutis, Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest, Pintler Ranger District, 88 Business Loop, Philipsburg, MT, 59858, (406) 859-8219.

11/30/2020

CAMERON L. RASOR
District Ranger

Date

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Map of the Proposed New Groomed Nordic Routes in Echo Lake Basin



